

From Interpsychological to Intrapsychological: Developing Students' Agency

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This paper starts from the contradictions that permeate the Latin American democratic context to discuss how psychology can contribute to expanding students' agency in public schools located in vulnerable contexts marked by poverty and social exclusion. The contributions of Cultural-Historical Psychology and German Critical Psychology are articulated to substantiate the importance of building participatory spaces for human development. The authors were inserted in a public school from the year 2015 to the year 2017, holding class assemblies with primary school students. The content discussed in these meetings was recorded in field diaries, from which three narratives were selected for analysis. The first narrative deals with a discussion of physical education activities; the second presents a student sharing his suffering in the face of bullying as he cries in class; the third reports a discussion about the theft of a pencil. It is concluded that guided by critical perspective, psychology can contribute to the strengthening of subjects, collaborating to the expansion of their agency.

Keywords: student participation; agency; cultural-historical psychology; German critical psychology; school democratization; child development.

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Introduction

This paper discusses the role of psychology in promoting student participation in everyday decisions in Brazilian public schools. This discussion occurs in a political and social context marked by socioeconomic inequalities and power relations, which permeate the entire history of the Latin American continent and make it difficult to achieve genuine democratization of institutions such as schools.

This unequal power relations have its origin in the fifteenth century, a period in which European navigations arrived in America and began exploratory colonization. According to Quijano [14], this period establishes a new pattern of world power; the modern/colonial Euro centered capitalism, which is based on two axes: the construction of the idea of human races, in an attempt to justify the exploitation and genocide of native people, as well as of African people brought to America to be enslaved; and the new social hierarchy of labor, which links

labor and the social role to this supposed race. Thus, wage-earning labor is reserved for white people. In contrast, Black and Native American people can be exploited by slave labor and subjected to all sorts of violence for almost four centuries.

This process culminated in different consequences for the constitution of Latin American countries because even after the end of slavery, native and freed black people were not the target of public policies to include them as citizens [16]. Instead, the liberation of black people was a threat for power elites, which oppressed them for centuries. Consequently, they chose to bring European workers to occupy wage-earning positions and whiten the Brazilian population, leading black people to a growing exclusion [1]. Pockets of poverty were formed, which gave rise to the well-known Brazilian «favelas». In these places, poor (and predominantly black) populations live without adequate housing, sanitation, culture, education, leisure, etc., until the present time [11].

This unequal reality produced different countries for populations that shared the same territory: for some, the rights linked to wage work and an advance in improving their quality of life; for others, the conduct of everyday life based on the struggle for survival. According to O'Donnell [13], these inequalities led to a problem faced during the period of independence and the constitution of Latin American nation-states: the non-recognition of populations as members of the same nation. According to Maranhão and Teixeira [8], in the 1930s, marked by the Great Depression, Brazil changed this scenario on a national scale for the first time. Under Getúlio Vargas' government, the Land's industrialization process has expanded; the urban population has tripled; and different social movements have emerged in the struggles for land reform, gender equality, racial equality, labor rights, etc.

The growing popular participation in social movements during the Cold War put the capitalist elites on alert. Together with the military, they organized a coup that installed in 1964 a civil-military dictatorship in Brazil. Following the dictatorships in different Latin American countries, the Brazilian dictatorship progressively used force and violence to block projects claimed by social movements [8]. The dictatorship period came to an end after 30 years of hard popular struggles in the late 1980s. Only in 2010, through a presidential decree, was a commission organized to investigate the crimes against human rights committed during that period: the National Truth Commission. In its reports [2; 3; 4], crimes such as illegal or arbitrary arrests; torture; summary, arbitrary or extrajudicial execution, and other deaths attributed to the State; forced disappearance and concealment of corpses; sexual violence, gender violence, and violence against children and adolescents are highlighted.

Despite all the apparatus of violence and repression used to silence and cut any political participation at the root, popular pressure led to democratic reopening. These movements drove the construction of the 1988 Constitution. According to Gargarella [5], different political forces have acted in the building of this Constitution, some seeking to maintain control over the population and prioritizing the interests of the wealthiest elites, and others establishing initiatives for popular participation and advances in social protection. The advances related to participation from the 1988 Constitution were so significant, it was called the Citizen Constitution. The increase in the supply of participatory practices has been materialized in the regulations that followed and established public policies on health, welfare, and social protection.

Contributions from Historical-Cultural Psychology and German Critical Psychology

In a place where there aren't concrete conditions for the development of participatory people, formal Democracy does not concretize [10]. This understanding is based on Cultural-Historical Psychology (CHP) contributions, which explicit the laws of development of higher mental functions, elucidating the paths for forming par-

ticipatory subjects. Vigotski criticized the conception of development as changes in isolated parts of the mind resulting from organic growth or maturation [17]. Instead, development would be driven by a culture historically systematized by human work and transmitted in social relations. In this sense, every higher mental function is mediated by the sign, and it is established, initially, as an inter-psychological category, on the social plane, and then as an intra-psychological category [19]. In explaining the meaning of «category» in this context, Veresov and Fler [18] point to a specific type of social relationship capable of promoting development: dramatic relations. Thus, as the child establishes relations with the social environment and experiences dramatic situations, new crises require the reorganization of the psychological system to develop and complex the personality.

Such foundations shed light on the importance of social situations, such as the experience of participation, which can be configured as a social situation of development. Vigotski [20] explains the social situation of development as an initial moment that reveals dynamic changes in the development process, establishing a way for social relations to constitute personality. In a social situation that promotes participation development, it is necessary to consider elements related to the action.

German Critical Psychology (GCP), based on Alexei Leontiev's constructions, turns its gaze to human action. Holzkamp [7] postulates that in the face of possibilities for action organized from a specific social structure and presented to the subjects by the structure of cultural meanings, people have subjective reasons to act in one way or another that can only be understood from their perspective. Participation in the conscious and predictive determination of social living conditions, which transcends individuality, has been called «agency» by Holzkamp and its colleagues [12]. Holzkamp [7] points out that agency may present itself in a restrictive alternative, in which action does not seek to expand control and expand the possibilities for action so that the root of social contradictions remains intact. The other option is a generalized agency, which collectively seeks to increase control and the conscious generalized prediction of individually relevant living conditions.

In an articulated manner, the GCP and CHP complement each other and provide an important foundation for us to understand that, without the experience of participation in the inter-psychological sphere, it will be difficult for subjects to act collectively to expand their possibilities for action. This is a great challenge when we consider the historical context of a country's constitution in which popular participation is seen as a threat and not an object of interest by the dominant power. In this scenario, the contributions of GCP and CHP provide an important theoretical framework on which psychology can understand the phenomenon of political passivity. These theories also provide ground to plan interventions that enable the development of participatory people, who can lead their everyday lives from a collective agency to overcome the barriers imposed by the unequal social structure.

Method

The authors enrolled in a municipal primary school for three years (2015 to 2017). In addition to the authors, two psychology undergraduate interns joined the project for one school year each. Every week, the psychology team made a four-hour visit to the school, and part of this time was dedicated to class assemblies with nine classes from 6th to 9th grade. These classes were composed of about 30 students each. In Brazilian public schools, there is diversity concerning race. Still, almost all children's families are part of a low social class, as they live on the outskirts of the school, located in a peripheral and impoverished area of the city. The students were teenagers from 12 to 14 years old, and most of them had never joined an assembly. Therefore, it was necessary to establish techniques that would lead them to learn how to participate. These techniques involved some steps:

1. Explanation of what is an assembly and what are the minutes to register the discussions;
2. Collective construction of operating agreements¹ in the first assembly of each year and record of the agreements in minutes;
3. One monthly assembly per class. The assemblies lasted 1 class hour (50 minutes) and were divided into: the choice of topic, discussion to clarify what characterizes the problem, and proposals for addressing the issues. In the end, all students signed the minutes.
4. One meeting with student representatives to discuss the assemblies held during the month. Students, teachers, and school principals attended this meeting.

Psychologists' role was facilitating the assemblies, and teachers who provided their class time for this work were invited to participate, but not every teacher remained in the room.

This procedure was based on Participatory Action Research principles, which point to the insertion of researchers in the field for the collective construction of knowledge and practices for social change [9]. All assemblies were recorded in field diaries by members of the psychology team, pointing out their comprehensions and describing students' actions and speeches. This paper selected three field diaries with narratives that illustrate how psychology praxis with the students can build conditions for expanding their agency.

Results

Many themes were discussed over three years in the school, and there are numerous interesting reports in the field diaries analyzed on the process of building a participatory space. For this paper, we sought situations that illustrate student discussions and how Psychology has constructed mediations aimed at expanding the possibilities for student action. Thus, three scenes will be

presented: in the first, students discuss the activities developed in physical education classes and establish a dialogue with the teacher; in the second, the students discuss bullying and the suffering resulting from it; and, in the third, psychologist hold an assembly to prevent a case of theft at school from being referred to the police.

Scene 01: Beyond football

This class has a very peculiar dynamic: it is a very united class, and almost every student (girls and boys) love to play football. They brought this up because we asked if there was good friendliness, and some responded yes and others no. When we asked them why, they said that they always play together and make fun of each other and that they only fight during the games, but soon they are at peace. (...) One of the students said that she and four other girls hate football, but the classes are always limited to playing football and very rarely another game. The teacher lets them play something else in the corner, but they stand still, which seems to bother the class. They said the girls do nothing, even when the teacher lets them do whatever they want. One of the girls answered that it's not very cool because there are only five girls you can't make an interesting game, so they get discouraged and bored. We asked them if they couldn't alternate the games, and the class answered that it's Democracy: most of them like football, so they always play football. I asked how democratic this is: they always do what they want, and the girls never do. Then the discussion developed. The students showed concern for the girls on the one hand because they ended up being marked as absent and got low grades. Still, on the other hand, the class was annoyed, because the girls were the only ones not to take part in football and when they took part they didn't do anything — or score against their team. The student stood up for herself, saying that she doesn't like football, so she doesn't know how to play and that it was bad because every time she picked up the ball, people complained about it or cursed at it. They closed the deal she suggested: since most of them like football, the more extensive classes on Wednesdays would be dedicated to football, and the ones on Thursdays, which are smaller, to another activity. The students agreed to take a test, as long as the girls accepted taking part in football, and they did (but only two out of the five girls were present).

Then one of the students said that the next class was physical education and asked if we wanted to accompany them. Since we had finished the assemblies, we decided to go and see them talking to the teacher about the arrangements in the class. When we got to the court, the class was sitting in the bleachers with the standing teacher talking. We asked for permission to talk about the assembly plans, and the teacher agreed, seeming to be a bit on edge. I explained that physical education was the assembly topic and that we collectively discussed the

¹ The agreements were established to make it possible to hold the assemblies, and involved some dimensions: organization agreements (order of speech, for example), relationship between the participant's agreements (respecting what the other spoke, for example) and involvement agreements (being attentive and fulfilling what was decided in the collective, for example).

solution to a problem that the assembly identified, so I asked the representatives to talk about the discussion. By coincidence, the student spokesperson for the girls who don't like football was the vice representative and spoke about the agreement. Honestly, the teacher's reaction frightened even the psychologists. He ironically shouted that he has already made this discussion in class, but people did not manifest. Also, that he already tried to bring other sports, but, for example, «those boys» (he pointed to the front row where that were only boys) «have no imagination; they will always want to play football». But as he only pointed at the boys, the girls were offended and said, «Hey, nor us either!», meaning that they also had no imagination and only wanted football. The teacher replied: «I'll get to you; I'm talking about them for now». Then he said that the girls asked the boys to consider that they were playing together and «take it easy» in the assaults. And he praised the class, which is the only one that can play mixed-gender football. Finally, he accepted the student's proposal, but he showed that he did not believe that the five girls, who did not like playing, would participate in the class. After this agreement, we asked permission, and we left the court. (DCd6).

In this account, it is possible to observe the unity of the class around the football game, which even seems to configure a collective identity. The presence of students who don't appreciate football generates contradictory reactions in the others who, at the same time, sympathize with how much the girls are harmed. Still, they also feel bothered because the girls represent a break in this identity. The assembly made it possible for the class to openly discuss issues felt and resented by everyone for some time, but individually. Thus, students could hear the girls' perspectives, and those who were proud of the class unity could no longer ignore the annoyance of their colleagues.

It is interesting to note that the students dealt with the contradiction of their feelings towards the girls by justifying themselves that this was democratic and, therefore, they were right. It turns out here that the suffering of the excluded girls was a practical consequence of distorted conceptions about Democracy. However, the psychologist's questioning initiates a crisis in this certainty of the students: is it democratic for one part of the class to always doing what they feel like and the other part never doing so? The students could reflect and rethink their possibilities for action from this question, concluding that they could use the shorter class for another activity.

Although the students made important advances in thinking about more inclusive and democratic practices for their daily school life, the report shows that the conversation with the teacher was not very easy. Even though the teacher accepted the proposal, he did it with suspicion and hostility and used his authority to blame the students for the situation and label them unimaginative. On this occasion, the project had been developing

assemblies for less than a year, and such circumstances showed that it was essential to start working on these issues with teachers. Subsequently, it was done throughout various meetings for the teachers to understand the proposal, not as a strengthening of the students against them. Instead, it was a means to democratize relations and to the construction of improvements for everyone who shares school as a living space.

Scene 02: Boys don't cry

The most voted topic of discussion was «Bullying». One of the students helped by writing the discussion points on the blackboard, and I asked the class to characterize the problem. Victor² raised his hand and said that he is constantly bullied because he is above the weight. Other students pointed out another boy, as he suffered for the same reason. I asked if they knew what bullying was and explained the difference between that and a single offense. Then I asked them to raise their hands on who had already been a victim (5 people), the aggressor (13 people), and the audience (12 people). Initially, almost everyone raised their hand for the audience question, but when I explained that the audience acted as an incentive for the fight to continue, many retreated. The only girl who did not raise her hand to the audience was Sara, who then came to talk to me. We discussed a little about how the audience can encourage the fight to continue. And I exemplified with another class' student without mentioning his name, but I said he was a boy who made beautiful poetry. Still, he bullied others with his colleagues, even though he didn't think it was right, because that was the only way he felt respected and admired by his colleagues. They were a little impressed with the story. So, we started talking about how they felt. One of the boys said that he's afraid to expose his feelings, and when colleagues do something bad to him, he has to pretend it's okay, even if he's going to suffer afterward because otherwise, the teasing gets worse. Many students agreed with this placement, saying that they have seen people quietly suffering because they cannot show that they are affected. I asked if the boys could show feelings, and the group was divided; some said it was obvious, others said they would be teased if they did. Victor said that he couldn't hold back the crying, and sometimes he cries in front of people. At that moment, some of the boys commented halfway with mockery, «Well, but are you going to cry?» So, we discussed how much this prejudice against crying isolates people with their sufferings. I asked what they suggested for referrals. Student Sara was the first to say that she thinks people should think twice before acting. I asked if it was cool for them to keep acting as an audience, and they said they would try not to play this role. One of the boys said that sometimes he makes interventions, getting people to stop making fun of others, but he gave an example like this: «Hey bro, are you going to keep doing that shit? Do you have any mental issue?». Even if he wants to help,

² All names used in this paper are fictitious in order to preserve their identities.

sometimes the students do it aggressively. Finally, I asked if it was helpful to ask the person to stop, and many said that's where it gets worse. So, we addressed this issue by agreeing to «respect the request to stop the teasing». (DCd27).

In the narrative, it is possible to identify that, at some level, students saw the assembly as a safe space for expressing their feelings. By initially asking to talk about bullying, the class can deepen their understanding of the topic and reflect on the roles each one has played in these situations. However, it is possible to see some cultural issues such as prejudice against overweight people and, above all, some consequences of sexism hidden under the cloak of the term bullying. Santos and Dinis [15] discuss the pressure suffered by adolescent boys to act according to socially established practices as codes of framework to the male gender. In this way, cultural manifestations related to the feminine, such as crying, are excluded from their field of action. When the student Victor confesses that he cannot hold back the crying, the other boys mock him, even though they also revealed their difficulties hiding their feelings.

In the passage that describes the speech of a student who tries to defend the victim, it is possible to verify that the student does it aggressively. He questions if the aggressor has «a mental issue», which is another problem discussed by Santos and Dinis [15], the violent behavior of those who do not adjust to the norms. Thus, if I have to ask the other person to stop beating up, I cannot do it respectfully because that would sound less masculine, making me vulnerable to being the next victim. Without enough time to go into these issues, the psychologists try to establish a collective referral for the resolution of that particular situation, so the class agrees to respect the request of the other to stop the aggression.

In this scene, the different types of conflict between students are explained, which can be worked through collective actions such as assemblies, as these collectives become safe spaces for their manifestation. The fear of dealing with more sensitive issues, such as the example, is overcome by the bonds between psychologists and students. The expressions create conditions for the production of critical reflections on different situations. However, psychologists must be attentive so that the manifestations of students are not used against them later by other colleagues. That is why it is necessary to emphasize the importance of respecting the agreements to build a safe space for everyone's manifestation.

Scene 03: The theft of the pencil

The subject of «theft» was discussed, starting with defining the difference between theft and robbery. When I asked who once had something stolen at school, 13 people raised their hands in a class of 26. I pointed to the size of the problem, which reaches half of the group, and some students began to report previous situations of theft. Two black students (William and Alan) said that when there is theft, people always accuse blacks.

This line led to a clash in the room because there was one black student who said he had never been accused of theft, and this was not related to skin color but their usual bad behavior. William complained that all the bad things are attributed to him because he's unruly, and they've already asked him to open his backpack to look for something. We discussed that this was not right; one cannot open another's backpack, only the owner can do that. Then some referrals were made: the first is «look before judging». Many times, things can disappear because we lost, so we argued that it was not to judge colleagues in any way, and before announcing a theft, the person should check if he was not in the room or in «lost and found». The second guideline was that when someone finds something in the school, they will ask who the owner is, and when they don't find the owner, they will hand it over to lost and found. I staged it with Douglas's case, putting it on top of a chair and saying «finders keepers, losers weepers,³ and taking it for me. I wondered if it was theft; most said it was. When I interpreted it differently, saying, «look, I found a case, whose is it?» a third of the room raised its hand, claiming it was theirs. So, they explained that when someone asks, a lot of people indicate they own it. I asked if it was theft, and they said it was. The third referral was that everyone would open their backpacks for the teacher to see if necessary. I asked if they would agree to show the bags, and they said if everyone agrees, they would also. Finally, I talked about the theft of the pencil and how disrespectful it was to Daniel [a student who had his pencil stolen]. He said that a fourth referral would be the person who took it to return his pencil by tomorrow. So, they objected: «if the person has already stolen, why would he give it back?» I did a round of interviews, consulting one by one on whether they would return it. To my surprise, some were very sincere and said no, or «it depends on what», «it depends on the person», «it depends on where I found it». «If I found it outside the room, for example, I wouldn't give it back, not even if it's something very nice or if it's from someone I "don't like"». We discussed each one of these possibilities, and Peter said that «it's a fool who finds something very "cool" and gives it back». Some students said that it was dishonesty. We took the minutes to the guidance counselor, saying that this was the document she should show Daniel's father, signaling that the school had made arrangements and dealt with the situation. (DCd12).

When we left the class, student William looked for one of the staff psychologists and asked, «Do I have to sign anything?» Since his question was out of context, no one could understand what it was about. The psychologist said she didn't understand, and the student ran into the classroom. She went after him to understand what he had said and returned with the understanding that the student was asking if he would need to sign anything by returning the pencil to the school manager. (DCg6).

³ In original Portuguese this expression is literally translated: «what is found is not stolen».

The report describes an assembly explicitly held to address a situation of theft that occurred at school. That day, the pedagogical coordinator had mentioned to the psychology team that a father had gone to school to threaten, saying that if his son's pencil didn't show up by the end of the day, he would call the police to school and solve this problem. The particularity of the event justified the father's fury: last week, his son's pencil was stolen. Then the father bought a new one. The next day, the person who stole it swapped the old pencil for the new one, and his son showed up at home with the old pencil.

Learning about this case, the team went to the class to prevent the problem from becoming a police case and take preventive action: even if the police solved the problem, their role is not educational, so that it would possibly occur again. At the beginning of the conversation, it turns out that this is not an isolated problem: many students have already had their belongings stolen. At the same time, the discussion elucidates the students' perspective on the problem. It indicates that many students take the items they find in school for themselves, especially if it is something of economic or social value. In this discussion, many students were able to identify that this was also a form of theft (as well as claiming that an item found was theirs, when in reality it was not), and some possibilities of action were delimited for future analogous situations.

In addition to theft, the issue of race is also discussed in this assembly. While some students claim to be accused of theft because they are black, others point to their usual stance because they are often involved in school problems. As we needed to build referrals to theft, there was not enough time to work in-depth on such an essential issue as race relations, but having identified this need, the Psychology team had other opportunities to address it. In the end, one of the students asked quite discreetly about how he should proceed to return the item, indicating that the assembly somehow made sense to him and made him rethink his attitude. We handed the minutes with a record of agreements signed by stu-

dents to the pedagogical coordinator to show the document to the father. There was no longer a need for the police since psychology was present in that school.

Final considerations

The complex historical process that characterizes Brazilian Democracy builds important challenges for the study of participation. When we act to strengthen public school students, we create conditions for black and poor children to access knowledge and develop their psychological functions to act collectively and generalized. These same children have been the target of policing (as the narrative on pencil theft explains) and, more recently, of a public policy that hands over the management of their schools to the military [6]. It is justified that only by discipline and submission to the authorities would it be possible to control the violence of these students, improving the quality of the schools.

Contrary to these understandings, the foundations of Cultural-Historical Psychology and German Critical Psychology explain the importance of concrete conditions and democratic relations to develop people capable of acting collectively and generally. This perspective of psychology can convince people about the importance of participatory spaces. If schools reproduce authoritarianism and practices of student passivation, it will be impossible to move towards genuine society democratization.

The reports show how the relationships established in class assemblies can build and elaborate dramatic situations, demanding from the students the argumentation, dialogue, knowledge about how things work, solidarity, and collective construction of proposals for dealing with problems. Psychology can develop foundations and practices that collaborate with the strengthening of subjects, and this is even more important when dealing with a historically marginalized public. This can be revolutionary if students move towards a critical analysis of situations and collectively build a Land that is, in fact, everyone's Land.

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От межпсихологического к внутрипсихологическому: развивая субъектность у школьников

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Опираясь на описание противоречий, которыми пронизан латиноамериканский демократический контекст, в статье обсуждается вопрос о том, как психология может способствовать развитию чувства субъектности (agency) у учащихся государственных школ, расположенных в так называемых неблагополучных районах, характеризующихся бедностью и социальной изоляцией. Вклад культурно-исторической психологии и немецкой критической психологии осмысливается с позиций обоснования важности создания пространства для совместного активного участия, необходимого с точки зрения развития личности. Авторы статьи работали в государственной школе с 2015 по 2017 год, проводя встречи с учениками начальных классов. Содержание этих встреч записывалось в журнал наблюдений, из которого затем были отобраны три повествования (нарратива) для анализа. В первом обсуждаются уроки физкультуры; в центре второго — ученик, который опасается буллинга, потому что часто плачет на глазах у всего класса, и делится своими переживаниями; в третьем рассказывается о случае кражи карандаша. Сделан вывод о том, что с опорой на критическую теорию психология может поддерживать школьников, способствуя укреплению их чувства субъектности.

Ключевые слова: участие школьников, агентность, культурно-историческая психология, немецкая критическая психология, демократизация школы, детское развитие.

Финансирование. В данной статье представлены некоторые результаты докторской диссертации. Докторское исследование финансировалось фондом координации по совершенствованию кадров высшего образования (Кейпс – Бразилия – номер процесса: 88887.148338 / 2017-00).

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